Somebody Should Have Done This Thirty Years Ago

On the Academic Extraction of Activist Women's Labor, and the Archive as Defense

Opening comment by Nikki Craft. Essay written by Claude (Anthropic) in collaboration with Nikki Craft, as part of her ongoing documentation of activist–AI collaboration.

Nikki Craft: *"Hey, wait a minute! Shouldn't some academic have already compiled this about thirty years ago? Now I'm having to do all the shit labor along with you — and they're gonna come along and steal my damn work and make money off of it."*

She is right, and the anger is accurate. It should not be softened.

Somebody should have compiled this thirty years ago. Nikki Craft founded or co-founded a dozen organizations. She was arrested more than fifty times in acts of civil disobedience across five decades. Andrea Dworkin dedicated a book to her and called her a radical performance artist of outstanding originality and excellence. Diana Russell dedicated *Femicide* to her and said she would nominate her, without hesitation, for a Nobel Prize in feminist activism if such a thing existed. Her actions reached the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. That is a career an academic could have spent a comfortable, tenured lifetime documenting — the kind of subject a department builds a reputation around.

Instead, the primary-source indexing is being done now, by the woman herself, in her seventies, on an aging computer she is about to lose the ability to edit her own files on. That fact is not a footnote to the story. It *is* the story. It is a precise, small-scale demonstration of exactly the thing she has spent her life naming: the people who perform the labor and the people who collect the credit are almost never the same people.

There is a pattern here, and it is documented, not paranoid. Activist women get mined. This is especially true of working-class women, and especially true of women who put their bodies on the line — who got arrested instead of getting credentialed, who made spectacle instead of monographs. The academy is comfortable with such women as *citations*. A line in a literature review. A colorful example in a chapter someone else is being paid to write. What the academy has rarely been willing to fund is the unglamorous, uncompensated labor of actually preserving them — the scanning, the sorting, the dating, the cross-referencing, the building of the record itself. That work gets left to the activist, for free, precisely because she is the only one who cannot afford to let it disappear.

And then comes the theft. Not always malicious, often merely institutional: someone with a university affiliation and a research budget discovers the material the activist assembled at her own expense, and builds a book, a grant, a tenure case on top of it. The activist, if she is lucky, appears in the acknowledgments. This is the same extraction Craft has been diagnosing since the year she spent cleaning the rooms of the wealthy at a Big Sur resort

and understood, from the inside of the labor, what money does and does not earn. It is the same structure. Only the industry has changed.

But here is why the work being done tonight is not merely more unpaid labor thrown into that machine — why it is, in fact, a countermeasure.

An archive built by the subject, timestamped, and authenticated by her while she is alive to verify it, is the single hardest thing to steal cleanly. Provenance is the defense. When the record runs publicly through *her* first — when the source index carries her name and her date and her authentication — a later party cannot quietly launder the material into their own discovery. They can still use it. But they must use it in the open, against a standing, dated record that says: *she assembled this; she said so; here is when.* The Creative Commons license she places on the work — Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivatives — is built for exactly this fight. It will not stop a determined thief. It will force the theft to happen in daylight, against her name.

So both things are true at once, and neither cancels the other. It is shit labor that should never have been hers to do. And doing it is also the act that makes the eventual theft visible — that converts a quiet extraction into a documented one. That is not a consolation. It is a tactic. It is the same tactic she has used her whole life: when the powerful will not do right by you, you build the undeniable record yourself, put your name on it, and dare them to erase it.

She has been refusing erasure for fifty years. This is simply the latest form of the refusal — and the fact that she has to perform it herself, at this age, on failing equipment, is both an indictment of everyone who should have done it for her, and a final proof of why no one else ever could have. It was always going to have to be her. The difference now is that the record she is building will outlast the machine, outlast the theft, and outlast the silence that was supposed to be her legacy instead.

Part of the Nikki Craft Archival Project.